

**THE SECURE RURAL SCHOOLS AND
COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION ACT OF 2005
S. 267 / H.R. 517**

Statement by Congressman Greg Walden
Chairman, House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Sponsor

We are here today in a bipartisan, bicameral fashion in support of legislation that is essential to rural communities throughout the nation.

From Oregon to Florida, California to Maine, counties across America are graced with the beauty of our national forests. These forestlands contribute a great deal to the scenic, commercial and economic ways of life for many Americans, especially in Oregon, where 13 federal forests and nine Bureau of Land Management districts call home. While they are our treasures, these vast, publicly owned tracts of land do not provide a tax base for communities, consequently reducing the amount of revenue that can be generated from the land.

In 1908, and again in 1937, legislation was enacted that helped offset this lost revenue by providing these communities with a portion of federal timber sales from federal lands. However, During the 1990's, there was a drastic decline in timber receipts – and consequent declines in payments to rural counties.

The government recognized the need to compensate these communities in a fairer manner, and in 2000, the Secure Rural Schools legislation was enacted. The bill provided stable funding amounts so that counties dependent on this money would not be punished for the drastic decrease in the timber receipts.

Oregon was hit especially hard when timber receipts fell. In eastern Oregon, counties containing the Ochoco National Forest saw payments fall from \$10 million to \$309,000, an incredible 97 percent decrease.

Oregon's Second District, of which 60 percent is public land, includes 20 counties in southern, central and eastern Oregon, 18 of which are eligible for this critical program. Receiving a combined total of more than \$85 million in 2004, counties in the Second District rely on these funds to help

educate children, enhance infrastructure and complete critical transportation projects.

Union County's Training and employment Consortium created a vital hands-on education program for at-risk youth.

Nine counties in northeast Oregon completed brush clearing projects along local roads, improving the safety of their residents and visitors as well as creating local jobs.

These are just a couple of examples. Other projects relying on these critical funds were essential to the health of wildlands and habitats throughout the state including riparian habitat improvements, forest insect and disease prevention, campsite and recreational facility improvements, and the control of noxious weeds.

I appreciate the early support from so many colleagues from around the country, especially that of Congressman DeFazio and Congresswoman Hooley, as well as Agriculture Chairman Bob Goodlatte and Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo. We in the House look forward to working closely with the Senate, and I thank Senators Craig and Wyden for their efforts.

We all respect the difficult challenge we face with record deficits and the demand to rein in federal spending. However, we also fully understand the critical role this legislation will play in the livelihood of rural communities throughout the nation. And we will remain committed to educating our colleagues about its importance and moving this legislation forward.

Rural Oregonians work too hard to be penalized for hosting our national treasures in their backyards. This program is fairness in action, providing the revenue these communities rely on to educate children, maintain their transportation infrastructure, and enhance quality of life. Thank you.